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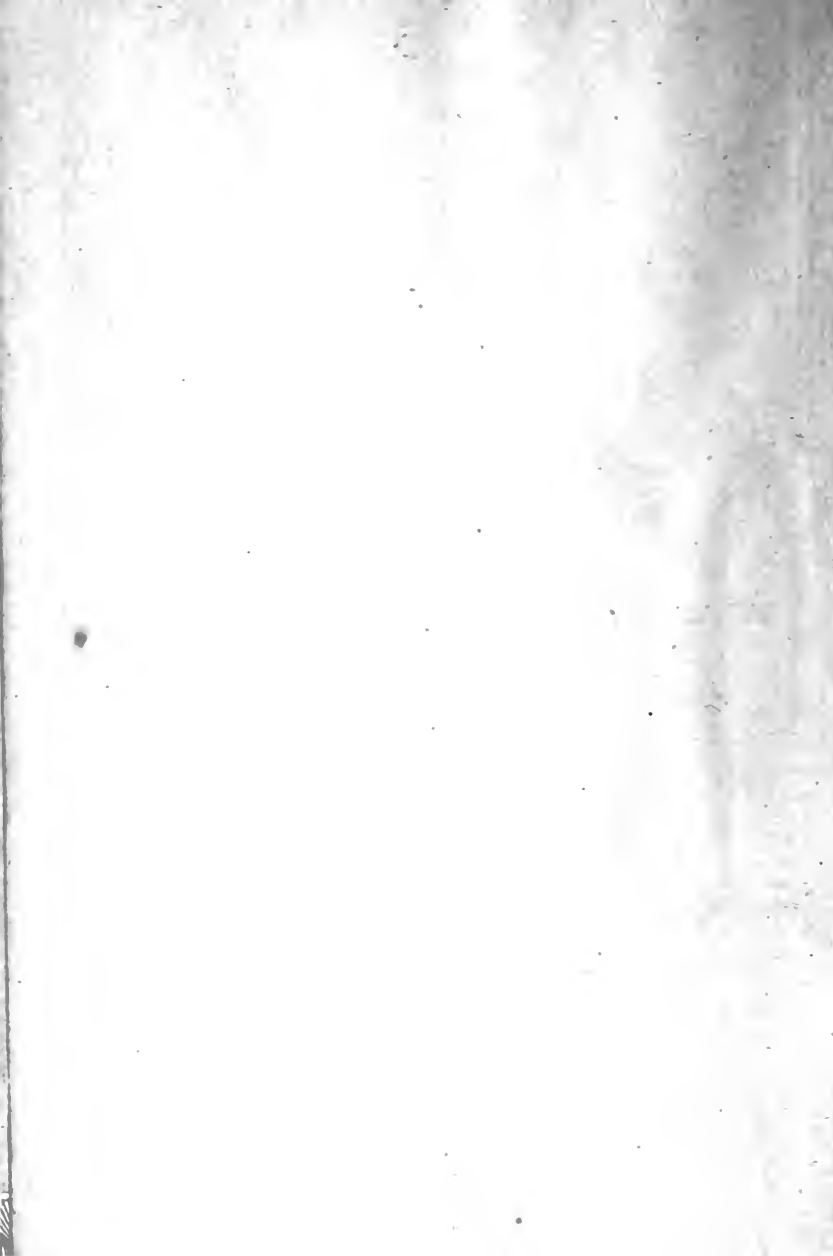


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LIBERAL THEOLOGY IN ENGLISH POETRY

*Blake to Shelley*

THE BERRY HILL LITERARY

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*THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1893.*

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THE  
Development of Theology,

AS ILLUSTRATED IN  
ENGLISH POETRY

*From 1780 to 1830*

BY  
STOPFORD A. BROOKE, M.A., LL.D.

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## NOTE

IN January, 1892, the Council of the BRITISH AND FOREIGN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION approved of a scheme for the delivery and subsequent publication of a Lecture dealing with some aspect of the history and development of Christianity, as viewed from a liberal and progressive standpoint.

The first Lecture of the series was delivered at Essex Hall, London, by the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, M.A., LL.D., on Tuesday, 23rd May, 1893, and it is now issued to the public, in accordance with the terms of the Lectureship, in the hope that it may assist in advancing the cause of a truer and more helpful religious faith among men than that which still finds expression in creeds and churches commonly called 'orthodox.'

*London, August, 1893.*



## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY

*As illustrated in English Poetry, 1780 to 1830.*

WHEN King Cnut sat by the seashore, his courtiers, flattering the pride they imputed to him, told him that the incoming tide would obey and retreat at his orders; and the king smiled and bade the sea return. But the waves broke around his chair, and he reproved the men who said that nature's movements would pause at his command.

There have been theologians for a thousand years who thought it could do honour to God to represent Him as forbidding the advance among men and in their mind of the ocean of His love from lower to higher levels. 'Here is the limit

of the tide,' they said. 'We are the only authority who can define it, and the King of Heaven speaks by our lips.' But the spiritual King, quietly seated on His throne, has allowed the slow incoming tide of wider thought in men to speak for Him, revealing, in the growth of universal ideas concerning His fatherhood of men, the real extent of His love; till now, in these latter days, we hear the sound of the waves which overthrow the barriers raised by teachers in the past. We understand that the tenderness of God does not retreat at the voice of those who flatter His might at the expense of His right, nor suffer itself to be limited by their inventions concerning His nature—inventions the real ground of which is the retention of their power. And we, uniting ourselves to the wider thoughts which the Spirit of God in man, in opposition to the priestcraft of Churches and sects, has now revealed, proclaim the universal power

of the Fatherhood of God to secure everlasting life for every soul, independent of all creeds, all churches, all confessions, all castes, all classes, and all colours; and to effectually call to Himself and effectually keep, at last, all His children to whose free-will only one thing is impossible—final division from the sovereignty of His love. When that conception of God is accepted, liberal theology has reached its highest peak. We stand on its summit and reach out our hands to God, with nothing between us and the infinity of His love. All the rocky limits set up by theologians in the past lie far below us; we have climbed beyond them all. The schemes of atonement which confined His Fatherhood to a few; the whole range of sacerdotalism, with its sacrificial theory created by and creating religious caste; the infallibilities of Church or Bible, without faith in which men were excluded from salvation; the compulsions and barriers of

creeds and confessions, outside of which men were apart from God; the divisions of men into saved and unsaved and of work into sacred and profane; the spiritual classes into which an imperialistic or a feudal God divided men—these, one and all, have perished for us, and we are left, as children, face to face with a Father. It is a mighty change of thought, so great that we have not realised as yet even the tenth part of its effect on religion now, or on the religion of the future. Nor, secondly, have we as yet realised the twentieth part of the effect it will have, when all men have come to believe it, on the social state of mankind. When we all feel that because all are children, all are brothers and sisters one of another, the whole face of the world will be changed; the social barriers which have limited the universal love of man to man, will, as the years pass slowly on, disappear as completely as in our minds have already

disappeared all the limits which set bounds to the love of God for man. This is the human outlook of Liberal Theology; and both this and the divine aspect of it belong to the subject of this lecture.

The question is 'How did such a radical change in theology as we have attained become possible?' It could not have appeared in early Christian times, nor in the middle ages; not as long, that is, as the imperialistic or feudal theory of humanity and its rulers existed. Men naturally transferred to God the powers they gave to an emperor, a king or a feudal lord. The emperor or the feudal lord was licensed by a divine right to treat his subjects as he pleased, and God was supposed to treat His subjects in the same way as earthly rulers treated them. Power made their emperors' right and privilege. Power made God's rights and His privileges. The theology became imperialistic and feudal. Again, classes were divided

by barriers, believed to be natural, from one another; natural hatreds existed. The social system separated and re-separated men by privileges, so that classes tended more and more to become unknown and opposed to one another, and finally at bitter enmity. And God was then supposed, in His arrangements of salvation, to organise the world under His rule in the same fashion. The notion of man as a whole, of rights and duties common to all, because all were children of One Father, was quite impossible under such theories of society and government. Nations also were as sharply opposed as classes. They had no common interests. The Church, it is true, did what it could to form, by a common faith and by a common reference to itself, a union among peoples and classes, but what it did with one hand it undid with the other by the division it made between the orthodox and the heretic, a division itself founded on belief



in a God whose love of man was conditional, not universal; who licensed the Church to say—‘Obey, question not, join yourselves to me, the sole privileged religious society, or perish everlastingly.’ Unspeakable misery was imposed on mankind by this imperial view of God; but the Church was not solely in fault. The Church has always followed society. It claimed to direct it—it was, in fact, directed by it. It never really rose above the level of human thought in its theology or its government. Its theology grew out of the general opinion of the world concerning men and their masters. When it made its God, it was thinking of divine government exactly as mankind was thinking of human government. It could not get beyond its time.

There was no chance then of theology changing until the existing views of human society changed. If theology was to be enlarged, they must first be enlarged.

Such a change is slowly generated; but its travail pangs began at last. A vast alteration of thought on the subject of man, an alteration from exclusiveness to universality, went on gradually under the surface of society for centuries, took a literary and philosophical form in the eighteenth century writers in France, and finally emerged a giant in the French Revolution, before whose irresistible force and growth the whole of the ideas of the old society perished for ever and ever. What seems to be left of them is but their ghosts, a host of pale-eyed, weary phantoms, whose very names fade away day by day.

The ideas then proclaimed were universal with regard to man, and in the directest opposition to those that had created the feudal theology. Man was one; what was true for one man was true for all; what was right for one was right for all. There were no class distinctions,

no privileges. There were no national divisions, no national enmities. There was only one class, the class of man. There was only one nation, the nation of mankind. All men had equal rights—I wish they had said that all men had equal duties. All men were equally free. All men were brothers. Men fought for ideas common to all, and the ideas were naturally universal. This was the immeasurable change of thought on the subject of man, and not only the feudal society fell before it, but of course the feudal theology. All the orthodox Christianity was cast out in idea, but not yet in fact.

We know how these ideas—too big as yet for man—were travestied, and how images of the old ideas came back in the reaction. But whatever the reaction, the ideas have ever since then grown and multiplied in society. Universal man,—universal brotherhood, liberty, and union, all for one and one for all, over the

whole world—these are the foundations of modern social thought, work, and emotion.

It was these ideas that rendered a universal theology, a new idea of God's rule and of man's relation to Him, possible for the first time in the history of the world. The imperialistic and feudal conceptions of God were struck with a mortal but a lingering disease. They, with all their notions of sacerdotalism and privilege, of unjust laws and unjust punishments, of God's will being other than love to all without conditions of opinion and ceremony, became wholly out of gear with that trend of social, political, and human thought which is called democratic. If theology were to fit into man,—into, as I should say, that new human idea which the Spirit of God working in man had created,—it would have to despoil itself of its aristocratic robes. And the fact is that the moment religion recovered from

the shock of the overthrow of its previous forms, theology began to become democratic. The conception of the universal Brotherhood of man, the moment it was transferred to the religious sphere of thought, implied, nay rendered necessary, the conception of God's universal Fatherhood. This could not have been conceived at large before by the mass of men. Men of spiritual genius after Christ conceived it, but their doctrine never spread. Now it is spreading fast, and it is the most important result which has followed on the promulgation of the universal ideas of man which appeared at the beginning of the French Revolution. The last to adopt these new thoughts into their own sphere are the Churches and the Sects, for such ideas dissolve their power over the souls of men; and in England the resistance offered to these ideas by the religious bodies has been always steady and often rancorous.

But this country was not left without witnesses. If the Churches were the last to take up these thoughts, there was another class of men who seized on them at once. These were the Poets. They were the first in the field,—they, the most emotional, the most imaginative, the most prophetic, and the most clear-sighted of men. Whenever they touched on theology in their poetry, these ideas influenced it; and that to so great a degree that the views of God and man put forth in their verse differed, towards universality, from the more limited views they entertained as religious men outside of their poetry. The theology of Wordsworth was far wider in his poetry than in his personal opinion. The theology, if I may use that term, of Shelley was far more believing in his poetry than in his prose. I do not think we have yet appreciated how large a part of that slow liberalizing of theology,

which, becoming possible for the first time in 1789, has now continued growing for a hundred years, has been done by the poets. They, commanding the hearts of thousands whom pulpits do not reach, bringing in their verse wider ideas of the love of man, binding all classes together on common human grounds, throwing all doubtful questions concerning the pity of God and His justice into the arena of the emotions,—have expanded even the hearts of the intolerant, and lured the world to believe that God is love. Sometimes they did this work by ignoring all the doctrines that limited His love; sometimes they did it by fiery indignation with those doctrines because they violated love. When they did it in the first fashion, they kept, but often with difficulty, the name of Christians. When they did it in the second way they were called heretics, or infidels, blasphemers or atheists. But names are nothing: they did their work,

and it was the work of universal love. How they did it at the beginning of this century and for some years before it in England, and how it ran on the lines of the change I have described, will occupy the rest of this lecture.

The first of these men was William Blake, that strange figure which started up alongside of Cowper and Burns before 1789, but who represented in his poetry, far more than they, the freer theology into which we have grown. It is curious to think that this retired mystic, who lived for his art and for spiritual thought, should have not only eagerly adopted all the new ideas concerning man, but also used them in the sphere of religion with such boldness that he anticipated many of the conclusions of modern criticism. He ignored or denounced all the points of doctrine which limited the love of God, all the restrictive laws which used force to promote orthodox faith or moral goodness.



The priests who invented an unforgiving God, the theologians who maintained the righteousness of the Jehovah of the exclusive Jews, whom he distinguished from the God of Jesus, were his abomination. He was equally severe on those persons who, rejecting religion, insisted on the moral law, discovered the curse of its rewards and punishments, and limited the freedom of the spirit of man. These men were the cause of more than half the evil of the world. From the hard, unforgiving, angry and jealous God whom the priests in all ages of the world had created—the great Forbidder,—Jesus, he held, delivered us. Jesus did not punish sin, he forgave it absolutely. Jesus, when he destroyed ‘Thou shalt,’ and ‘Thou shalt not,’ established in their stead Forgiveness. This was the very Word of God on the whole matter of sin. The punishment of sin by God was His forgiveness of it, and only when men forgave God for all the ill they

thought that He had done to them, could they lose the sense of sin, or the desire to do it. Man's forgiveness of all wrong which he thought done to him by nature and God, and God's forgiveness of all evil—these, Blake said, were the gates of Paradise. He was then at daggers drawn with all the old theology, with every doctrine that set any limit to the freedom of all men to love God, or to the freedom of God to love all men. All forms of faith or ritual which had conditions attached to them, and restrained the individual freedom of the spirit, he attacked and hated. All outward infallible authority of books or Church he denounced as iniquitous. Jesus alone, with his infinite love, had seen the right, the true thing, that God was a Father, with a Father's heart. How could man be one and indivisible, he thought, if theology divided men into those loved and those cursed of God. Given the unity of man, the universality of God's love was

a necessary consequence. This was a wonderful anticipation, at the very beginning of this century, of a great part of the theology we are growing into at its close. It was made by a poet and a painter, whose soul had been awakened by the mighty cry of the Revolution for the freedom and unity of man.

The next poets in date whose influence was extensive were Burns and Cowper. Both were affected, before the date of 1789, by the new ideas of the freedom and brotherhood of man, by the demand for the overthrow of unjust privilege. I have elsewhere drawn attention<sup>1</sup> to the different ways in which this new view of man vitalized, as with a new spring, the poetry of these two men, but their work is not directly concerned with the advance of liberal theology. Indirectly, however, it had a great influence on that advance, because it made men feel that God cared

<sup>1</sup> *Theology in English Poetry*, Kegan, Paul & Co.

for them as men, and not as members of any Church or sect. The whole range of man is covered by Cowper; and the social direction of liberal theology at the present day, with its cry against every kind of injustice and its cry for equal opportunities for a happy life being given to all, begins with Cowper. In him, first of all in England, we understand that the service of man is the service of God—that proper Christian formula, the foundation thought of Christ, the foremost thought of the universal Church we hope for in the future. This pervades all his writings, and it was carried by his poetry into almost every home in England. The influence of this work of his indirectly relaxed the ferocity and loosened the restrictions of the Evangelical theology, and prepared the way for our deliverance from it. Moreover, the restoration of all things took vague form in Cowper's mind. It was limited by his personal theology,

but in his poetry he arose above his theology. The thought of universal regeneration carried him away, when he prophesied, as it carried away the writer of the Book of Revelation, whose Judaism vanishes in moments of exaltation.

Again, both Cowper and Burns came into contact with the most dreadful forms of Calvinism, and the result this Calvinism had on their poetry assisted liberal theology by the violent shake, as of earthquake, it administered to the inhuman lies of Calvinism about God and man. But the way the blow was given was different. Burns hated and rejected the Calvinistic doctrine and pilloried it in *The Holy Tulzie* and in *Holy Willie's Prayer*. In spite of the irreverence and immorality of these poems which lessened their effect, they have weakened the worst doctrines of Calvinism far more than ten thousand liberal sermons have done. The strong foundation on which Burns built all

his poetry was the love of man. It is inconceivable, thought Burns, that man should be subjected to such horrors beyond the grave, only for the sake of opinions. He went further. The pity in him forced him to feel that God's love was greater than any Church had ever conceived. And in one of his poems he hopes for the salvation of the devil himself, a position once held by liberal theologians, before they stepped further and denied the very existence of the devil.

Cowper, on the other hand, accepted the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation, and acquiesced at times in God's condemnation of himself to eternal hell. This belief, acting on a slight tendency to insanity, drove him at intervals into full madness. No poems are more terrible and more pathetic than those written under the unmitigated influence of this shocking faith. The power of their pathos and the horror of their despair have done a great deal to

discredit a doctrine which could so injure one of the gentlest, most loving, most holy of men. He died, refusing comfort to the last. 'I feel,' he said, when asked how he felt; 'I feel unutterable despair.' They are words which all the good deeds of the professors of Calvinism will never get over. 'He was mad,' they say; but what drove him mad? Did Jesus teach in order that men might become insane? for Cowper is one among millions whom this doctrine of God has ruined morally, intellectually or physically. But they have perished, unknown, unheard. This man was a poet, and his words have told. His personal acceptance of the horror revealed, as the mockery of Burns did not, the idolatrous foulness of this doctrine concerning God.

The next great name is that of Coleridge, or rather, Coleridge and Wordsworth appear together. The influence of Coleridge as a philosophic prose writer on the growth of liberal theology may

justly be said to be great. His influence on it as a poet is inappreciable. In his early days, sympathising with the new ideas about man, he saw in their proclamation a revelation of God, and founded the universal brotherhood of man on God's universal Fatherhood. But there as a poet he stayed. The miserable close of the Revolution in the attempt of France to enslave Europe drove him out of poetry and out of the ideas he first loved, and the one contribution which he made as a poet to a wider theology—with the exception of his conviction that all nature was the reflection of the universal spirit of God in our own mind—was the closing verse of the *Ancient Mariner*.

He prayeth best who loveth best  
 All things both great and small ;  
 For the dear God who loveth us  
 He made and loveth all.

Wordsworth, as a poet, had no systematic theology, nor does he attack or support



any special theological view in his poetry. Of what he did in widening our view of the natural glory and goodness of humanity, especially among the poor and the simple classes, and of increasing our sense of the divine in man; of the way in which he applied the new ideas concerning man to human life and society, even after their failure in France shocked him into conservatism, I have spoken so much in *Theology in the English Poets*, that I must not here repeat myself; but his work on this side of it has been of the greatest influence on English thought. The unity of humanity rises out of it supreme, and the unity of humanity means the overthrow of a theology which divides humanity into two parts, one saved, and one neglected or condemned. Passing by this then, one of the great contributions that he made to a larger theology was his replacement of the idea of God as the mere Creator of nature from the outside, of nature as a

kind of machine which worked itself, by the conception of nature as filled in every part by God, as living, not only as a whole, but also in every separate flower and cloud, by the immanent life of God in it; and correlative with this, his conception of God as conscious of Himself, in special thought, at every point of nature's being; and also as conscious of Himself, as a whole, in the whole of nature.

And as he also conceived of God as realizing a personality in every human soul, there was an inner harmony between nature and man. God in man spoke to God in nature, God in nature spoke to God in man. They were two different manifestations of the one soul of all things. He has profoundly impressed this thought on the mind of England, and it has destroyed, in the realm of poetry and in all poetic hearts, the mechanical view of God and the universe.

His statement of it in poetry has a

pantheistic air, but no one was less a pantheist than Wordsworth. He believed that God personally companied with the soul of man. His apparent pantheism then, when he spoke of nature, could not have been pure pantheism. And indeed if we are to consider him as any help towards our liberal theology, he must have seen his way out of pantheism, for pantheism alone, unless it is greatly explained away, loses that sense of an indestructible personal relation between God and man which is at the root of our theology.

Wordsworth partly got rid of this difficulty by dematerializing the universe in thought. As a poet, he only saw the spiritual substance which lay within every outward form—the life and thought of God by which the universe became apparent to us. Then

The gross and visible frame of things  
Relinquishes its hold upon the sense,  
Yea, almost on the mind itself, and seems  
All unsubstantialized—

and the living soul of man communes directly with the living soul of nature, thought to thought, feeling to feeling. This thought common enough to philosophers, has reached through Wordsworth's poetry thousands who have never read philosophy, and has prepared their minds for that spiritual conception of God immanent in every form of matter, and of matter being in ultimate thought God's spiritual energy, which will not only finally govern, I believe, all our liberal theology concerning the world without our personality, but also bring about at last the complete reconciliation of science and religion.

We are left, however, by this very near to ideal pantheism. That was not Wordsworth's view with regard to us as men and women. When he spoke of God and man, he spoke of God in a direct personal relation of love and guidance to us, of God as the source and end of personal duty, of life as lived consciously towards one who asked

us to obey and love Him, and who helped us to union with Himself. When then he lived with nature, he felt God as impersonal and he uses impersonal terms about Him. When he lived with men and felt himself as man, he spoke of God as personal. He had then a double view of God, and though he never puts this forward, it appears throughout his poetry. For my part I think that this is the double conception of God to which we shall come—God in us becoming personal, God in nature being impersonal. In the union of these two conceptions of Him we shall find our highest thought of Him who is our Father and yet the incessant Energy of the infinite universe. Whether liberal theology has arrived at this as yet, I do not know, but I think that it will arrive at it in the end. If so, Wordsworth will have done a great deal to bring it about.

I now pass from Wordsworth to Byron. It may be thought that he at least did not

do much towards the rise of a more liberal theology. He did much more than we think, only he did it not by construction of a new, but by destruction of an old theology. Byron did not care to maintain any of the larger ideas about liberty, equality, and fraternity. He had a poet's hatred of oppression towards the end of his life, and that was all. But the overthrowing, the upturning, the destroying element of the Revolution was in him, directed by great mental force and by a reckless daring. And he attacked all the old, grey-haired conventions of respectable society, when they seemed to him to be led by hypocrisy; and the more time-honoured they were, the more he mocked and despised them. Among the rest he struck at the ancient, accredited doctrines of theology, and he struck savagely. They were supported by all the conservative elements in Church and State, and by all the cultivated class who wished to stand well with the

world. To touch them was to touch the ark of God, worse still, it was to shock the religion of respectability. There never was a time in England when it was more important, than in Byron's time, that some bold and outspoken scepticism should proclaim that it was in antagonism to theological authority, and should set free the minds of men for a new and searching inquiry into the grounds of faith in God, into the destiny of man. And Byron,—and his being a peer gave at that time greater force to what he did,—spoke out with such amazing lucidity and such giant energy on some radical doctrines of the old theology, that the very shop-boys feared no longer to think and doubt; and doctrines hoary with decay and disease ceased to be considered infallible or unassailable.

There had been, it is true, plenty of inquiry, but it was under the surface of society. Byron brought free inquiry on theology to the surface of society; and

among all ranks, both in England and on the Continent, men felt their minds delivered. He did it in a wrong fashion, and it produced much evil. But religion wanted then a drastic purge, and Byron gave it. When the wrong way he did it ceased to produce its ill effects, the good effects remained. Fearless inquiry was promoted. Hypocrisy which thought itself not hypocrisy, knew itself. The slavery of religious conventions lost its lash and its fetters. Byron was a great disintegrator and a great emancipator. He is not much read now; he was enormously read then; and my opinion is that we owe the rise of a manlier and a freer theology as much to the reading of Byron as to the reading of Coleridge; or, to put it more accurately, the great mass of the reading public, who do not read philosophy or theology except in sermons, were prepared by Byron—and many more by Shelley—for the reception of a wider



theology by the fierce shaking he gave to the idea of God contained in the doctrines of the Fall, of the Atonement, and of the cool consignment of the greater number of the human race to the claws of the devil.

His position towards these doctrines was a very curious one. He accepted the common doctrine of the whole race having sinned in Adam and therefore being under the curse of evil. He accepted the doctrine that God, being absolute sovereign, could do as He liked, and that He liked to let all men sin in one, and for His own glory saved a few by His Son's atonement, and left the rest to perish. There was no room, then, he argued, for free will. He became a Fatalist. Most men, among whom he was one, were irrevocably doomed. His *Manfred* is himself, so is his *Cain*. He accepted also the doctrine that evil was eternal; and he added to these, out of his own heart, that

God was an evil God. It is not curious that he believed these doctrines, but it is curious that, with this belief, he should have so unmitigated a horror and hatred of them and yet never think of disbelieving them. He believes, hates what he believes, stamps with fury on his belief, and yet clings to it. I sometimes think that he took a kind of pride in his isolation as a condemned soul, and indeed this appears all through his *Manfred*.

But this was not all. We should be unfair to Byron if we thought that he considered himself alone with regard to these doctrines. He felt also for the human race. He felt the boundless pity of a poet for the misery of man, thus overwhelmed by God in pain and ruin. There is the passage in *Childe Harold*, where he is not touched with the vanity of *Manfred*, but with the hideousness of the evil which the theology in which he believed had laid, like a leprosy, on human nature.

Our life is a false nature—'tis not in  
The harmony of things—this hard decree,  
This ineradicable taint of sin,  
This boundless Upas, this all-blasting tree,  
Whose root is earth, whose leaves and branches  
    be  
The skies which raise their plagues on men like  
    dew—  
Disease, death, bondage—all the woes we see,  
And worse, the woes we see not—which throb  
    through  
The immedicable soul, with heart-aches ever new.

This aspect of the world, his own terrible fate as a portion of it, his pity for himself gradually merging in a vaster pity for the whole of humanity, his hatred and horror of the whole thing, his loathing of being obliged to conceive God as the author of this, his rebellion against such a God, his inability to disbelieve in this which he loathed, and a vague cry for some deliverance—all grew and multiplied in Byron's heart, till at last he threw it into his drama of *Cain*, the most powerful, the most

human, the most serious thing he ever wrote, and the most effective. It is not much read now; I meet few people who have read it. But at the time it was widely read. The clergy rose almost in mass against it, and we know how the denunciations of the clergy minister to the universal reading of the books they declare unfit to read. Jeffrey, with studious moderation for him, for he was afraid of Byron, declared that *Cain* 'would give great scandal and offence to pious persons in general, and be the means of suggesting the most painful doubts and distressing perplexities to hundreds of minds that might never otherwise have been exposed to such dangerous disturbance.' 'The whole argument is directed against the goodness and power of the Deity, and against the reasonableness of religion in general, and no answer is attempted.' 'This argumentative blasphemy forms the staple of the piece.'

Jeffrey's opinion was the opinion of the cultivated persons of the day. I have told you the doctrines *Cain* attacked. You see that Jeffrey thought they were quite consistent with God's goodness, and that the power which they made God exercise was not an evil power, and that the religion of which they formed the staple was a reasonable religion. If he thought thus, what must the clergy have thought, and the great mass of pious persons in England?

It was high time that a down-right, uncompromising indictment should be made against these doctrines and from the laity, if ever theology were to be set free from them. If it could be made by the foremost literary man in England, and in poetry which should confront these intellectual doctrines with the anger and pity and love of the human heart—why so much the better. Such an indictment is *Cain*; and we, who have ceased to read it, have no

notion of all that it may have done for us. It was, however, almost altogether a work of destruction, and as such, it had not half the good result it might have had. It was also done with a reckless bitterness and anger which lessened its effect. But first, on the other hand, these grey lies needed the sword and a pitiless wielding of it, and secondly, there is this to be said in excuse of Byron, that though he abhorred the doctrines, he believed in them. If he could have disbelieved them, he might have treated the subject more mildly. But his belief in them made him furious. The indictment is, however, all the more powerful. It is a man rebelling against his own belief. I cannot analyse *Cain* here, but you will find, if you read it, not only the cry of the heart against a false God—for all through the poem that is the true poetic position which Byron takes—but also, in a close which is ineffably tender and beautiful,

many foreshadowings of what the nobler theology thinks concerning the proper atonement for sin, the just doctrine of forgiveness, and the true view of the nature of man. Cain, before the drama ends, has learnt something of true sacrifice; we feel that he is half redeemed.

And the man who wrote this wrote *Don Juan*! It is a wonderful contrast, but the one was as revolutionary an attack on society in its hypocrisies as the other was on theology in its unquestioned conventions. We owe at least to *Cain* and to some other poems, that the way was prepared for the wiser and juster assault made with piety and knowledge as well as with love of God and Man on the ancient evil views of God, which began with Maurice, the spiritual child of Coleridge, and then within the sphere to which I am confined to-night, was taken up by Tennyson and Browning, and by a host of smaller poets, among whom the writer of *Festus* is

remarkable. These did the work in another and a better fashion than Byron, but I doubt whether they would have been able to construct this higher theology in poetry, had not Byron done with so much explosive power his work of destruction.

Shelley did also a work of destruction, but in a very different way from Byron. He began by being an Atheist, he ended by being what we call an Agnostic, but he was, as a Poet, carried away beyond both these positions by the emotion of the loftier spiritual ideas. He continually rose out of denial and out of professed ignorance into prophetic cries which imaged forth the truths of which he declared he knew nothing at all. He thinks the existence of a conscious will and character behind the Universe not quite thinkable, but in his poetry he is led to imply it again and again. He does believe in an immortal Love, and though he does not, as Christ did, give it a



personal life, yet he thinks of it, first as pervading the whole universe, and secondly as being at the root of the life of Man, who is to end in universal Love. He thinks Immortality improbable, yet he glides into words in his poems which continually imply it, and the whole of Humanity, conceived as Prometheus, is immortal with Asia, who is the all-kindling love by which the universe of Nature exists. He is precisely in the same position in which a great number of men and women are at this present moment—who in the world of reasoning say that they know nothing of spiritual truths, but in the world of imagination and love are continually allowing to their hearts that of which their understanding gives them no proof. This is a position into which they have been driven, first by the contest between the old theology and the new which has left them without authority, and secondly by the destructive work of

Science and Criticism on doctrines which religious folk declare to be of the very foundation of religion. This position of theirs was that of Shelley sixty years ago; and you may imagine what a storm it created among the orthodox. The quietude with which those who now feel with Shelley are treated is greatly due to the determined stand which Shelley took, and to the spirit of gentleness, endurance, and love in which he said that persecution was to be met, and nobler views maintained. He was in the strongest opposition to the orthodox theology of his day on the main ground that it violated love and justice and pity and long-suffering. He declared that whenever any theology violated the primary human affections it established uncounted evils and wrongs among men, and trampled into the dust all the feelings and thoughts by which men could become good. He laid the whole of this theology before the tribunal

of love in the human heart and asked for its condemnation, and though he had not for many years much influence on the upper classes, yet this impassioned representation had an immense influence on all among the working classes and the poor who after 1830 were seeking for the redemption of the people from social wrong and religious tyranny. I think we have never yet fully realised what religious truth, as we conceive it, owes to Shelley. Among us, theology has not been burdened with the iniquitous doctrines Shelley hated, but they had been imposed upon the masses. It was necessary, if a nobler theology were to prevail, that the masses should be prepared for it, that what pure human love said was right should be proclaimed to them as the only test of theological truth. This Shelley did for them. He fed the heart of the world, and bade it believe in its own feelings. The God they teach you, he said, is not

God ; the religion they teach you is no longer religion ; the end of Man is not that which they say it is. The whole scheme is now a lie. It is in contradiction to love, and love is the only judge of truth. This is the main power of Shelley in the sphere of the subject of this lecture, and a mighty and effectual power it has been in the foundation of a Theology whose first principle is the statement of Christ—God is universal Fatherhood moved by universal Love, and the Love in the human heart is the express image of His Love.

Then Shelley, moved by social wrongs, and indignant with the resurrection of privilege in Churches and States which was caused by the reaction from the cruelties of the Reign of Terror, took up again all the universal ideas about Man which Wordsworth and Coleridge had dropped. He re-worked them into poetry, but with a great difference from the spirit in which they had been carried out in France.

With regard to Religion, it was of first rate importance to liberal theology that those ideas should again be proclaimed in England. As I have already explained, it is not till every shred of the theories of government and society which are founded on privilege is destroyed that we shall be able to get the whole people to have a theology at all. Such a theology must be one which has no privilege in salvation, which conceives God as bound to be the Father of all men alike, independent of church and sects and creeds and ceremonies; influenced only by His duty as a Father, only a King because He is a Father. Shelley fought over again all the battle, and restored the ground on which a liberal theology could be established.

But he fought the battle, as I said, with an important difference. He learnt from the failure in France and from his own nature that force and violence were not the methods to be used in this work; that

to establish love by violence was to re-introduce the evil things against which he contended. Love can only be established by love. Suffer and endure wrong rather than join the ranks of wrong by inflicting suffering even on the tyrants. Forgive all injuries. Only by forgiving them are they overthrown. Recall the curse, if you have pronounced it against your foes ; recall it, as Prometheus did. Till your whole mind is freed from wrath and cursing, you cannot conquer in this great strife of the world for the happiness of men. To these thoughts the whole of the *Prometheus* is dedicated, and the redemption of Man is wrought by the unbroken faithfulness to love of Prometheus, the ideal Man. It is the very image, the very embodiment of our conception of the salvation of Man, and of the saviours of the race as we see them in the life and death of Jesus Christ. No modern poet has seen so clearly as Shelley did in what the salvation of man consisted,

how a Saviour of mankind is to be conceived ; and when our liberal Theology has fully reached, as it scarcely has as yet, the level of Shelley's thought, both theologically and socially, we may indeed have a religion which will once more regenerate the world, and once more recreate before us the proper idea of Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, Shelley more than any other poet, far more than Tennyson or Browning, has kept before our eyes, and ennobled into amazing beauty, that doctrine of our new Theology which looks forward to the full regeneration of mankind ; to all men equal in love and therefore equal in happiness, freed from law because established in the love which fulfils the law, and enjoying a new heaven and a new earth.

This earns now the mockery of men. They sneer at the Utopia of the *Prometheus Unbound*. They do not believe in man loosed from all his fetters,

and with the vulture of self no longer gnawing at his heart. We are in a parenthesis of disbelief in the final triumph of love and righteousness. Man is going on, we are told, from bad to worse. At least that gloomy view is not ours, that is not the faith of liberal theology. We believe in a God who is leading all men at last into joy and goodness, in whom all humanity will be redeemed into a perfect life. When we are in the gloom and despair which these half-scientific, half-feeble, and wholly luxurious views impress upon us, it is well to read the *Prometheus Unbound*. It will kindle in us a spirit which will leave us unsatisfied, desirous of a happier life for ourselves and for mankind. It will put us into the temper in which we shall rise into a higher faith than Shelley had, into the truth that man is the child of immortal love; and that his destiny in God the Father is righteous joy, and universal



love making universal justice. And to stimulate and create that temper is not the least of Shelley's gifts to the cause of a liberal theology.

With Shelley my subject closes. All these tendencies towards a more liberal theology, all these assistances towards it in poetry which I have laid before you, were before their time. They were voices crying in the wilderness to a few scattered folk; but in the scattered folk they lived; and ten years after Shelley's death, they were as the murmur of many waters. Their sound is now gone forth into all lands and their words to the end of the world. But when Shelley died, silence fell among the poets on all these subjects. Indeed the silence had come before he died. No social interest, no modern theory of man, no theological question engaged for a moment the mind of Keats. Though he lived at the same time as Shelley and Byron, he

really represents the time beyond them, when England, wearied with theories concerning God and man, wearied of social, political, and theological battles, and subsiding into a materialistic life, gave up the strife and went to sleep. Keats represents that profound exhaustion. He turned from all these dried-up interests to the search for beauty alone, and he found it, not in the present, but in the past.

Ten years, as I have said, went by. Then came the great awakening. All the social questions on the state and destiny of man, all the theological questions concerning the nature of God and man, arose from the dead with a new light in their eyes. How the poets from 1832 took up these questions, how far they assisted to broaden our theology ; how, not by destruction but construction, how, not in opposition to religion but in harmony with it, they built up new doctrines of God and man, is a subject full of interest. But we

are so closely mingled up with its existing energies that I do not think it will be fit for treatment till another twenty or thirty years shall have passed by.

Meanwhile, out of all the teaching which poetry has given to England for the last hundred years from Blake to the present day, out of all that it has attacked in theology and all that it has supported, one thing emerges clear—that the love God has implanted in the human breast, is, in all its righteous energies, the test of theological doctrine, the foundation of a theology which we may justly call liberal. Let us live to support and establish that noble necessity for mankind. Day after day, year after year, let us say to theology what Jesus said to each of us—Be perfect in love, even as the Father is perfect in love.



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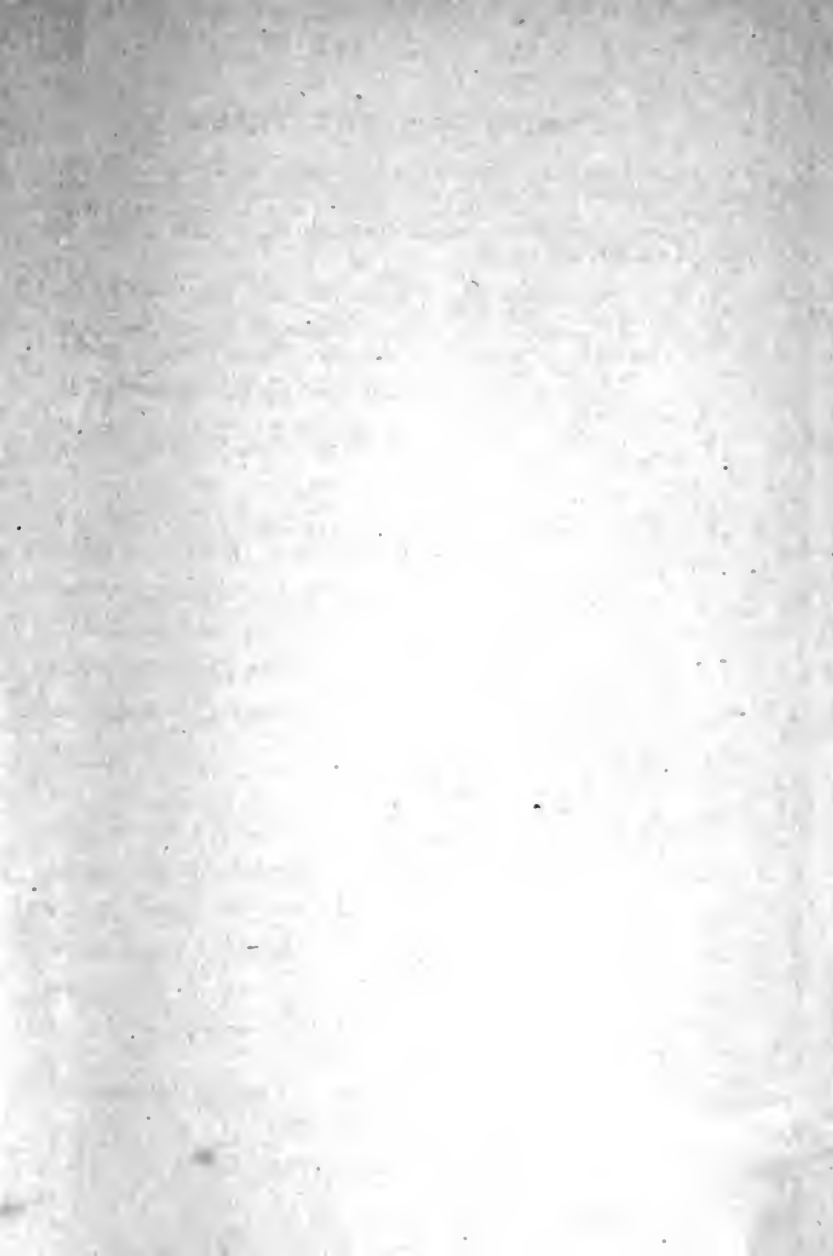
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